

## 124 Blogs ‘n Talk Radio

For listeners eager to have their say on radio, the surest way is through the web. Recognizing that a daily smorgasbord of opinions and ideas flow freely online, talk radio programs like *Open Source* and *Air America* are turning to bloggers to provide content for their shows.

*Open Source*, distributed by Public Radio International, draws on comments and information posted by bloggers on its website, [www.radioopensource.org](http://www.radioopensource.org). Bloggers suggest ideas for the program, recommend guest speakers and questions, and even appear as guest speakers. According to its site, *Open Source* sees itself not as “a public radio show with a web community” but “a web community that produces a daily hour of radio.” To date, about 40 stations (out of nearly 10,000) carry the program, whose topics range from global warming to national service in America to Groundhog Day to what to do in outer space.

Bloggers are also playing bigger roles in balancing and policing the air waves. For an independent talk radio show like *Air America*, which was created during the 2004 presidential elections to counter conservative talk radio shows like *The Rush Limbaugh Show* and *The Sean Hannity Show*, bloggers’ input is critical because the show doesn’t employ its own reporters. In 2007, hundreds of blogs demanded that advertisers pull their ads from San Francisco-based radio station KSFO-AM after several of its talk show hosts allegedly made racist and violence-inciting remarks. Audio clips of the shows were posted on blogs—and some were sent to advertisers, causing companies like Bank of America and Mastercard to stop advertising with the station.

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San Francisco and was touted by some as the beginning of syndicated “liberal radio.” Relying on easily identifiable personalities, *Air America* Radio signed on with dayparts hosted by comedians Al Franken, Janeane Garofalo and Public Enemy rapper Chuck D. With the Fairness Doctrine now a distant memory, such “one-sided” left-leaning programming content became just as fair as the conservative radio that had been around for decades.

Despite reaching 2.1 million listeners on 75 affiliates, in 2006 the company filed for bankruptcy claiming it had lost more than \$40 million in the two years since signing on. On top of that, the network also lost Franken—by far its highest-profile host—who resigned to run for the U.S. Senate in Minnesota. Still, in early 2007 *Air America* was purchased by Stephen Green, a real-estate entrepreneur who guaranteed to bring what he called an “underperforming asset with unrealized potential” to profitability.<sup>8</sup> His effort also failed, and *Air America*—as live radio—folded in early 2010.

The failure of *Air America* reignited the debate about why conservative talk radio was dominating the format. Conservative talkers pointed to the demise of *Air America* as proof that Americans

reject liberal ideals and have no interest in listening to progressive talk show hosts. However, former *Air America* employees blamed the network’s failure on a series of owners and managers with little broadcasting business experience.<sup>9</sup>

Proponents of progressive talk radio note that many liberal or left-leaning personalities are doing well. *Air America* alumus Randi Rhodes left the network to be syndicated by Premiere Radio Networks that also syndicates conservative Rush Limbaugh’s program. Rachel Maddow moved from *Air America* to a prime time show on the MSNBC cable network. Progressive hosts Ed Schultz and Stephanie Miller who chose to remain independent of *Air America* remain nationally syndicated.

### Embracing Formerly Taboo Topics

Although the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine removed most government-imposed restrictions on the nature of talk programming, several social and cultural events in the 1990s appeared to give broadcasters the public’s permission to stretch the limits of what is considered acceptable on radio in another direction. What had once been confined to the

seamier sections of porn magazines, internet chat rooms and X-rated movies was by the late 1990s suddenly fair game. Media frenzies such as the O. J. Simpson trial, the Jon Benet Ramsey murder, and the Clinton impeachment hearings encouraged on-air listeners to vent their reactions to topics as intense as murder, child sexual abuse and oral sex. Many programmers heard from citizen action groups outraged by the sordid and often sexual details being broadcast during morning drivetime—not coincidentally the times when parents drive their kids to school with the radio on. Most of these programmers held their ground against such groups, claiming First Amendment protection of the “information” being broadcast. The truth for many, however, was that regardless of the programmers’ opinions about the Bill of Rights, many of the personalities who caused such an outcry with their titillation were also generating huge ratings numbers and advertiser revenue.

In early 2004, however, things began to change. Some content aired on broadcast stations seemed to go too far. One was a radio stunt created by Opie &

Anthony (former talkers on WNEW in New York) in which listeners were encouraged to have sex in public places. At first, this seems no more shocking than other stunts hosted by syndicated personalities on hundreds of stations across the country. Still, when the Opie & Anthony bit resulted in a broadcast “play-by-play” of copulation—at New York City’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral during a mass—the ever-elusive line of public acceptability was crossed.

Then, Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake had a “wardrobe malfunction” that led to Jackson’s breast being exposed to 800 million people during CBS’s 2003 Super Bowl halftime broadcast. Shortly thereafter, the FCC began to strengthen its public stance against indecency. Congress, too, began to give the FCC a bigger club to swing at station owners who allowed their personalities to be overly prurient: The legislators increased indecency fines from a measly \$27,500 to as much as \$500,000. This greatly increased the motivation of station owners to keep their personalities on a shorter leash. In the past, many had decided that the small fines were a price they were willing to pay for ratings success (see 12.5).

## 12.5 Indecency Eventually Costs Infinity

When does programming result in a broadcaster making a million-dollar “voluntary contribution” to the United States Treasury? When it’s indecent. Since the late 1980s, the FCC had been frequently issuing notices of apparent liability (fines) against Infinity Broadcasting for Howard Stern’s allegedly indecent broadcasts. Infinity’s president, Mel Karmazin, first reacted by saying the company would refuse to pay the fines, claiming that Stern’s program content was protected by the First Amendment. But in 1995, Infinity Broadcasting finally agreed to pay (and as a reward, got its record of indecent broadcasts expunged).

Two developments brought about the Infinity settlement. First, in 1995 the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, DC, upheld the FCC’s ban on indecent broadcasts in the daytime and evening (between 6 A.M. and 10 P.M.). Second, and much more important, Infinity was trying to buy nine radio stations (in addition to the 22 it already owned). Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view), the purchase would require the FCC’s approval.

After Karmazin failed to persuade the commissioners to lighten Infinity’s penalty, he then agreed to the \$1.7 million “contribution” while claiming his intention was to “conserve the time, expenses and human resources of the parties” involved. Howard Stern called the settlement “extortion” and the “biggest shakedown in history.”

The actual amount paid, negotiated down to \$1,175,000, was the largest fine ever paid by a broadcaster. Of course, it pales when compared with the value of the stations Infinity acquired as a result of the settlement (\$375 million) or Infinity’s \$3 billion value. If you won’t laugh, I’ll tell you that Infinity also agreed to establish a program to *educate* its on-air personnel about the FCC’s indecency actions. Educate Howard Stern?

And Infinity has morphed into CBS Radio to clean up its name.

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Increased reaction against vulgar conversation led radio ownership giant Clear Channel Communications to drop *The Howard Stern Show* from several markets and to fire long-time morning host Bubba the Love Sponge in early 2004. These moves have forced even the milder talkers who rely on innuendo rather than blatantly sexual topics to rein in their content. For example, Tom Griswold, one-half of the *Bob & Tom Show*, said that the show is “not going to take the chance of being anywhere near the line. We’ve pulled way, way back.” The current goal, according to Griswold, is to produce a show “that a soccer mom can listen to with her kids in the car.”<sup>10</sup>

The pendulum may have swung back to caution when it comes to bad taste on information stations. However, public taste is fickle, and daring programmers have made names for themselves and their stations by pushing the envelope. That may be the reason why Stern’s show was immediately picked up by competitors in four of the markets where Clear Channel removed him from the airwaves. Eventually, however, the three big-mouths—Stern, Bubba the Love Sponge, and Opie & Anthony—moved to satellite radio, safe from all FCC restrictions.

## Migration to FM

Another important factor in the rise of the information format was the drastic migration of listeners from the AM to FM bands. In the largest markets, audiences began abandoning AM stations for FM stations in the early 1970s. Those music formats that had proved successful on an AM station were rapidly duplicated by FM stations with higher quality sound and then got higher ratings. By the late 1980s, it was clear no all-music format could survive on the AM band. As Chapter 11 points out, program directors of AM music stations were quick to find that *when AM and FM stations offer similar music programming, the bulk of the audience will choose to listen to the FM stations*, leaving the AM stations struggling for advertisers and revenue.

At roughly the same time as the Fairness Doctrine was abandoned by the FCC, many AM stations faced financial pressures unseen since the advent of television, leading radio personalities to start supplying

strong, one-sided political opinions or sexual innuendo rarely before heard. By the mid-1980s, with a nothing-left-to-lose philosophy, AM stations, even in large markets, were willing to gamble on unknown syndicated talk personalities. Visionary talk syndicators initially offered the programming for free (in exchange for clearance of the commercials), and local AM station owners were thus able to cut the expense of paying a local personality. Although almost no one in the industry believed daytime talk programming on AM could succeed, much less draw audiences back from FM, there really were no other viable programming options.

While information programming gave AM radio a new lease on life, new dynamics are shifting talk radio onto the FM band. Just as AM radio found it could not compete with music formats against FM stations, FM now must compete with digital platforms that allow consumers to listen to all of their favorite music on cells, MP3s and tablets. Internet music services like Pandora allow listeners to customize their music listening experience, and webcasters now offer a variety of streaming music on the internet that is easily accessible through wireless portable devices. Listeners, particularly younger people, have stopped letting radio stations decide which songs they should hear. FM then has to go after whoever will best please its advertisers.

While FM stations are facing the reality that they are no longer the preferred platform for music delivery, AM stations are coping with a listening audience that is aging and technical problems that can make hearing AM stations sometimes difficult. The population of older people who are accustomed to listening to AM radio is shrinking, yet they are not being replaced by younger people because most don’t listen to AM radio. This is a particularly difficult problem for AM because advertisers most want to reach younger listeners.

AM signals are more susceptible to interference and static than FM from things like thunderstorms and various kinds of machinery. AM signals also have a harder time penetrating the steel structures of big-city skyscrapers where thousands of potential listeners work. Finally, many AM stations must reduce their power or sign-off at night when AM radio

waves travel farther to avoid interfering with other stations on their frequencies that have been given a higher priority by the FCC. As you can imagine, this is a major problem when those stations carry sporting events that last into the evening hours! These AM reception problems, the need for news/talk formats to grow younger audiences, and the migration of FM's music formats to digital platforms are triggering the shift of news/talk formats to FM.

## Mobile Phones

Most talk shows depend on call-in listeners. Until the 1990s, talk shows had low levels of participation, especially during the peak periods of the morning and afternoon drivetimes. To people who have *always* owned a cellular telephone, this may seem illogical, but keep in mind that mobile phone technology was not widely used until the 1990s. Luckily for the format, just as the content of talk on radio was becoming more interesting, cell technology emerged to allow easier participation by listeners...wherever they were. The ability of broadcasters to offer free cell-phone calls to the station's phone numbers (in return for running advertising for the cellular service) made it easy for listeners call in any time of day—but especially during their morning and afternoon commutes.

Moreover, it quickly became standard procedure for the hosts of many talk shows to move callers on cell phones to “the top of the list,” thereby giving the impression that the opinions of cell-phone callers had a greater chance of being aired—and leading more and more commuters to chime in. The proliferation of cell phones has been a boon for information programmers because research shows listeners are more likely to tune in when they can call in, even if most are unlikely to actually call.

## Synergistic Advertising Environment

Information radio provides an environment uniquely attractive to radio advertisers. For one thing, the audiences tend to be more loyal to the format than audiences of other formats. This, coupled with the fact that in many smaller markets only one information station exists, means that listeners are less likely to

tune out during commercial breaks. Music stations, on the other hand, often have many competitors both within and between their formats. Even more detrimental to advertisers are those music stations that promote a “more music, less talk” format. This, in effect, equates talk (that is, the information that happens between music, such as commercials!) with negative emotions and invites listeners to tune out once a commercial set starts.

On information stations, however, commercials seem less of an interruption and are merely more information that the station wants to impart to its audience. Thus, *given equally-sized audiences on both a talk station and a music station, advertisers are willing to pay a higher price to place their commercials on the news/talk/sports station—because more of the listeners will stay tuned during the commercial breaks.*

Although the synergies between programming and commercial content have undoubtedly contributed to the talk format's rise in popularity, changes in the media environment mean that information programmers may need to reevaluate their strategies on commercial spot loads. First, *more minutes of commercials are broadcast per hour on information stations than on any other format.* While originally viewed as a benefit to station owners, commercial clutter has reached an all-time high: Marketing messages appear in more and more places all the time, and consumer fatigue may not be far behind. Information listeners may eventually become less forgiving of an overload of commerce.

Furthermore, the popularity of the format has brought competition from other sources hoping to capitalize on the public's desire for information. Listeners can now find information programming in the form of news, talk or sports talk from multiple radio stations in a single market, not to mention web-based talk networks, satellite-delivered radio, cable television networks and podcasts. *Loyalty to a particular source is likely to go down in this competitive environment.* The wise information programmer will try to convince upper management that ultimate station success may be as much a factor of keeping listener loyalty as maximizing the number of commercials played per hour.

## Information Programming Formats

Before discussing individual formats specifically, a reminder of how syndication delivery works in the media industries may be helpful. (For a more in-depth discussion, see Chapter 3.) Although many programmers initially think of television when they hear the word *syndication*, a vast number of highly-rated syndicated radio shows exist as well. Any of the formats described in the following sections could either originate in the local station's studio hosted by local personalities or, instead, be delivered by a national personality via satellite by such companies as Premiere Radio Networks, Westwood One and Citadel Media.

Many syndicated shows that once relied on only terrestrial broadcast signals for distribution struck deals with satellite radio services. For example, Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck are syndicated to AM and FM broadcast stations via satellite by

Premiere Radio Networks, but also have their shows distributed directly to listeners on the Patriot channel of Sirius/XM satellite radio.

This satellite radio presence, along with web-based delivery, podcasting and the growth of syndicated radio, has all but obliterated a clear line of distinction between traditional network radio and syndicators. Premiere and Westwood One are syndication companies, while ESPN Radio is a traditional network. According to some, there is *no* difference between such entities, especially in radio. When a single personality such as sports talk host Jim Rome appears on hundreds of stations via syndication, the impact for advertisers on a show is the same as the impact of Colin Cowherd, whose program is available only to ESPN Radio affiliates. Few of the tens of thousands of people listening across the nation care whether a show is coming from a network or a syndicator or appears online (see 12.6). The distinction may continue to remain important to some programmers, however, because of the prestige and branding associated with being

### 12.6 Wi-Fi Radio

**T**housands and thousands of audio services are streamed over the internet—simulcasts of many AM/FM broadcast stations, internet-only webcasters, and radio stations from foreign countries. You can listen to these internet audio streams over a computer, tablet or smartphone that has access to the internet.

Wi-Fi radios look and act more like traditional AM/FM tabletop or clock radios but link to internet radio stations through a wireless access point using Wi-Fi technology. Unlike a wireless carrier's wide area network (WAN) that covers several miles around each of its tower sites, a Wi-Fi "hotspot" is a local area network (LAN) with a range of only a few hundred feet that is intended to be an extension of a nearby wired internet connection. So Wi-Fi radios will only work if they are within range of a Wi-Fi hotspot.

With a broadcast radio, listeners can quickly tune up and down the AM or FM band looking for programs that interest them. A Wi-Fi radio must know the specific web

address of any audio service you want and then connect itself to that service's own computer (called a "server"). You must then wait several seconds to establish the digital audio stream, so it's not practical to browse internet audio offerings on a Wi-Fi radio.

To help listeners search through the thousands of audio services available on the internet and quickly access their favorites, Wi-Fi radios usually interact with a portal or aggregator web site such as Reciva Internet Radio ([www.reciva.com](http://www.reciva.com)), or vTuner Internet Radio ([www.vtuner.com](http://www.vtuner.com)). These sites catalogue and organize internet audio services by location, language and genre. Listeners visit the sites to browse through audio services and designate their favorites. Those favorites then appear as "presets" on their Wi-Fi radios much like favorite radio stations are assigned to buttons on car radios.

**Internet connection → Modem → Wireless router →  
Wi-Fi radio waves ))))))) Wi-Fi radio**

an affiliate of a highly regarded and widely recognized network such as ESPN Radio.

As a result of the vastness of the national audience, radio remains a gold mine for talented syndicated entertainers. For example, in 2008, Premiere signed Limbaugh to an eight-year contract extension reported to pay him \$38 million per year plus a \$100 million signing bonus. That same year, Sean Hannity signed a five-year contract reported to be worth around \$100 million. The reason for paying

such enormous fees to syndicated personalities is that they generate huge advertising revenue. Talk show hosts like Limbaugh have fiercely loyal audiences (see 12.7) who are very responsive to advertisers who support the programs.

One worry is that paying such big bucks for superstars in national syndication deals will leave talented newcomers no place to develop their skills on local radio. Michael Harrison, publisher of *Talkers Magazine*, said, "It's really sad that so much

## 12.7 Rush Stumbles But Doesn't Fall

Rush Limbaugh started his radio career at the young age of 16, working as an afternoon drivetime disc jockey in his hometown of Cape Girardeau, Missouri. After a relatively nondescript career in music radio and a short stint in the advertising office of the Kansas City Royals' baseball team, he found his voice as the host of a political talk show in Sacramento, where he tripled the ratings for his time slot. Eventually, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, with its decidedly conservative political stance, found an audience at stations across the nation. Today more than 20 million listeners tune in each day to hear Limbaugh pontificate on his self-proclaimed E.I.B. (Excellence in Broadcasting) Network. Limbaugh's success in the 1990s spread to other media, too; he authored two books that were bestsellers and hosted a syndicated television program for a while.

Although his politically-focused TV show was eventually canceled, in 2003, he had another shot at TV stardom—this time as a commentator for ESPN's *Sunday NFL Countdown*. Limbaugh said he wanted his role to be providing the "fan's perspective" on what long-time ESPN sportscasters Chris Berman, Chris Mortensen and other announcers said during the show. It was understood among cable programming insiders, however, that ESPN had hired the talk host to do what he did best: generate controversy.

After only five appearances, Limbaugh did just that. During a preview of a Philadelphia Eagles game, Limbaugh commented that Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb's abilities had been overrated by the media because he was an African-American. In hindsight, what may have been more shocking than the claim itself was that none of the other hosts (two of whom were African-Americans) challenged Limbaugh on it. Nor were they instructed to do so by the

ESPN producers, either during that segment or after the subsequent commercial break. Although Berman and other sportscasters on the show later made public statements denouncing Limbaugh's comment, ESPN executives did not. Less than one week later, however, Limbaugh resigned.

Personal troubles continued that year for the man who often says his "talent is on loan from God." In October the newspaper tabloid *The National Enquirer* published a story claiming Limbaugh's former housekeeper had provided his employer with thousands of prescription pills over the course of four years. A short time later, Limbaugh announced on his radio program that he was addicted to prescription painkillers and was checking himself into a rehabilitation program. According to Limbaugh, the drugs had first been prescribed to him by his doctor following spinal surgery six years earlier. This prompted a state investigation and attempts to unseal his medical records to determine whether he used his public personality to "shop" for physicians who would provide him with the drugs.

After 30 days in rehab, though, Limbaugh was back and as bombastic as ever. What is remarkable is the extent to which Limbaugh's audience remained loyal. Survey research found that more than 90 percent of his regular listeners said they listened to him as much now as they had before the scandal. According to the researcher who conducted the study, there was "no increase in defections or negative comments even at the height of the most negative publicity. The majority of his regular listeners are still rock-solid behind him."<sup>11</sup>

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money will go to the superstars and so little to the new talent.”<sup>12</sup> However, some predict the next crop of talented talk personalities will come from digital platforms, not the traditional route of working their way to national syndication from smaller market broadcast stations. Personalities who can prove their talent by building a unique brand with a loyal audience through podcasting or web streaming will catch the attention of syndicators looking for the next big talk personality.

## All-News Formats

Amid the earlier discussion of personalities and commentary, it is easy to forget that some radio programs do not comment on the news but simply deliver it. Radio did not become a primary source for news coverage until World War II, when radio technology, although still new to many, became the source of the memorable voices of Edward R. Murrow, William Shirer and the other great war correspondents who offered listeners the sounds of battle and bombing. Today, the use of radio to keep in touch with what is happening in the world and in local communities remains popular. In such major markets as Chicago (WBBM-AM), New York (WCBS-AM) and Philadelphia (KYW-AM), all-news stations are consistently among the most highly rated.

The all-news format consists of continuous newscasts, usually in 20- or 30-minute segments, for 24 hours each day. One example is WINS-AM (New York), whose slogan for a long time was, “At 10-10 WINS, give us 22 minutes and we’ll give you the world.” Because stations following this format repeat news cycles over and over, they tend to attract listeners for short periods of time—only long enough to hear one or two of the cycles. By the second time, most listeners recognize that the content is nearly identical to what they heard only minutes before. This means the all-news format is a *high-cume, low-TSL* format; in other words, it depends on high cumulative ratings to counteract low time-spent-listening numbers. Because cume ratings are based on the number of unduplicated listeners who tune in, locally produced all-news stations

are normally found just in larger markets with big enough population bases to generate the needed audience flow.

Given that listeners are constantly tuning in and out of all-news stations, commercials, program elements and promos must be scheduled much more frequently than in other formats in order to obtain an *effective frequency* among the constantly changing audience. While station managers and air talent will get “sick of hearing the same thing over and over and over,” the program director must look out for the typical listener, who tunes in for perhaps 20 minutes a day and relies on the heavy frequency in order to be sufficiently exposed to the information.

Another important philosophical decision for an all-news programmer is to decide on an optimal ratio of different types of news: hard news, entertainment news, economic news, human-interest stories and so on. Some all-news programmers insist that as many stories as possible should contain a local angle. In other words, even if the story focuses on something taking place overseas, such as the 2011 Pacific earthquake and tsunami, in order to get on the air the story must be written in such a way as to have a simple, clear answer to the question, “How does this affect our local audience?” This is often accomplished by the presence of an “exemplar,” a local resident or expert either affected by or offering their opinions on the story.

Other programmers make sure their content contains an ample supply of news about motion picture celebrities, television stars, famous athletes and sex scandals. To them, “news” is the type of information that can be talked about in the break room at work or with a friend you meet for lunch. For these reasons, stories about international relations, macroeconomic policy, scientific discovery—news that cannot easily be put directly into a human context—is seldom covered.

## Network-Delivered Newscasts

Most large-market stations are now so tightly formatted that they want newscasts more tailored to their format than any network can provide. In response, the traditional radio networks have shifted

from delivering newscasts to becoming sources of original sound bites. Stations then use the network sound bites to craft their own custom newscasts.

Increasingly, network news material is delivered not by a local anchor or as part of a traditional newscast but by a sidekick to the station's drivetime personality. One model for the newscaster as sidekick is Robin Quivers, who began as a newscaster but who now is, in effect, one of the team of co-hosts of *The Howard Stern Show* on satellite radio. Using members of the wacky "morning zoo" team as newscasters may make traditional journalists shudder, but the practice has increased program consistency, reduced audience turnover and resulted in increased ratings. As local stations increasingly model their formats after Stern/Quivers or Imus/McCord, entertainment environments become the primary sources of local and national news on radio.

Ironically, what were once the great radio network news departments have assisted in killing themselves off by passing along sound bites of everything from presidential addresses to Hollywood stars pushing their latest productions. In 2004, however, Fox News surfaced as a radio power on stations owned by Clear Channel Radio, reviving network-delivered newscasts in about 400 markets. Bringing its uniquely conservative slant, Fox builds radio interview shows around current and former cable news hosts such as Brian Kilmeade and Alan Colmes.

In smaller markets and on less successful stations in larger markets, network newscasts can still be heard in their entirety. Because these stations have much smaller audience sizes, the radio networks could not survive financially if these were the only audiences their national advertisers could reach. *Stations that choose not to carry the newscasts in full (mostly major-market affiliates) are required by network affiliation contracts to at least broadcast the commercials that were included within the newscast.* Stations receive private feeds of the commercials from the networks for local recording and insertion into local programs. They also receive schedule information from the network. They must then schedule the network's commercials in time periods equivalent to when they would have aired in the newscasts. After these replacement

commercials air, station personnel produce affidavits for the networks affirming the times and dates the network spots ran (as proof so their advertisers pay the bills).

## News Scheduling Priorities

Because the programming of all-news stations is based on repeating cycles, scheduling considerations tend to be tighter than for talk stations. On the average, news occupies about 75 percent of airtime on an all-news station. The basic elements of newscasting at an all-news station include the following:

- Hard news copy
- Recapitulations (recaps) of major stories
- Question-and-answer material from outside reporters
- Results of public opinion polls
- Telephone actualities from exemplars

Earthshaking news developments on a global or national scale are not necessarily uppermost in the audience's notion of what is news. During morning drivetime, weather and traffic reports should be emphasized as they will determine how listeners start their day. A typical urban schedule runs in this way: time announcements at least every 2 minutes; weather information (current and forecast) no more than 10 minutes apart; traffic information every 10 minutes; plus, interspersed, related information such as school closings, major area sports events and so on. In other words, *the top priority in any all-news format is local, personal, service programming.* Item repetition slows during midday as average listener TSL increases, and is stepped up again during afternoon drivetime (4 to 6 P.M.).

Predictability is important in news programming because the audience will get used to coming to the station at specific times for program elements such as weather, traffic and sports. During drivetimes, in fact, many all-news stations develop on-air slogans that emphasize when listeners can count on hearing what matters to them most during their commute to work. For example, WWJ-AM (Detroit) gives its listeners "traffic and weather together on the 8s," meaning



listeners know that they can tune into the station at 8, 18, 28, 38, 48 and 58 minutes past each hour and be sure to get the information they need.

## Talk Formats

Just as there is format fragmentation in music radio (discussed in Chapter 11), traditional talk has fragmented to include hot talk, advice talk, business talk, sports talk, success talk and other niche formats. Such variations of talk radio differ in approach, sound, and “attitude” and appeal to quite different audiences. Most consultants now identify at least ten major talk formats, shown in 12.8 and described in more detail in this section.

### Heritage Talk

Heritage talk stations typically are 50,000-watt clear channel stations that have included at least some talk programming for 40 years or more (see 12.9). Twenty years ago, these were classified as full-service stations

with a mix of news, talk, sports and midday music. Increasingly, these stations have moved to all-information formats with emphasis on local news, weather, traffic, sports and local talk. They are also able to attract the highest rated of the nationally syndicated talk programming, primarily because of the wide signal coverage they have at night. These stations typically carry heavy commercial loads, often up to 20 minutes an hour.

### Politics/Issues Talk

Political talk occupies a formidable spot on any list of information radio formats. Rush Limbaugh is certainly the king of the genre, but there are many other well-known syndicated personalities out there, such as Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Glenn Beck and Ed Schultz. Politics/issues talk is sometimes described as programming hosted and listened to by “angry white men”—leaning to either the left or the right politically. However, that characterization is not altogether accurate. There are examples of successful hosts of color in this format, such as

## 12.8 Ten Top Talk-Radio Formats

- 1. Heritage talk:** Traditional news/talk formats, mostly on the AM band. Broad appeal with mix of news, sports, talk, health and financial features.
- 2. Politics/issues talk:** Discussion of the latest issues coming from Washington, DC, around the world, or from the local city and state.
- 3. Sports talk:** Discussion of the issues surrounding major team sports of interest to men: football, baseball and basketball. Often also supplemented with play-by-play and “guy talk.”
- 4. Success talk:** Formerly, money talk or business radio. A mix of investment and personal advice for financial success. May include talk about upscale travel, recreation and relaxation.
- 5. Hot talk:** Younger demographic appeal with sexually-oriented content. Found on FM stations, but mostly on satellite radio and digital platforms.
- 6. Urban talk:** Similar to heritage talk but with African-American appeal. Tends to be in urban areas.
- 7. Faith talk:** Also called “religious radio.” Used to be exclusively Christian, but now characterized by a growing multitude of faiths.
- 8. Spanish/foreign-language talk:** Similar to heritage talk but appealing to the needs of the demographic audience that speaks the programmed language. One of the fastest-growing formats.
- 9. Health and help talk:** Advice given to callers about anything from health to finances to home improvement. Includes many syndicated weekend programs.
- 10. Technology talk:** Initially limited to discussion of computer and networking issues, but expanding to include discussions of all types of electronic gadgets.

## 12.9 Heritage News and Talk

In the mid-1960s, the foundation for all-news radio was laid by two major broadcasting groups. The first was Group W, the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, which converted three AM stations—WINS (New York) and KYW (Philadelphia) in 1965 and KFVB (Los Angeles) in 1968—to an all-news format. CBS followed suit with several of its owned-and-operated AM stations, first at WCBS (New York), KCBS (San Francisco) and KNX (Los Angeles), and later at WBBM (Chicago), WEEI (Boston) and finally WCAU (Philadelphia).

By the mid-1990s, hundreds of stations, mostly AM, were identifying themselves as all-news or news/talk stations, and the format was spreading beyond major cities into smaller markets. Although the all-news format is dependent on local programming, network affiliation provides coverage most local stations cannot supply. In addition, a growing number of syndicators supply both affiliated

and nonaffiliated stations with news services and programs.

The term *talk station* was generally adopted when KABC in Los Angeles and a few other major-market stations discarded their music formats around 1960 and began airing information programming featuring the human voice. KABC started with a key four-hour news and conversation program, *News/Talk*, from 5 to 9 A.M. KGO in San Francisco later adopted the name of that program to describe its overall format. KGO used news blocks in both morning and evening drivetime and conversation programs throughout the balance of the day. KABC focused on live call-in programs, interviews and feature material combined with informal and formal news coverage. KABC first promoted itself as “The Conversation Station,” but *news/talk* stuck as the generic industry term for stations that program conversation leavened with news during drivetimes.

Lincoln Ware on WDBZ in Cincinnati and Jo Madison, “The Black Eagle,” on WOL-AM in Washington, DC, who can also be heard on SiriusXM satellite radio. At the local market level, Ray Taliaferro was the first black talk-show host in a major market. He started in talk radio in 1967 and joined KGO-AM (San Francisco) in 1977 where he has been talking politics in the Bay Area ever since.

Many programmers find success by scheduling female hosts who can intelligently communicate a political viewpoint to an audience. Progressive talker Randi Rhodes broadcasts live from Washington, DC, during afternoon drivetime and is syndicated nationally by Premiere Radio Networks. Diane Rehm of National Public Radio (NPR) and WAMU-FM (Washington, DC) has been effectively discussing political issues on the air for more than 30 years. *The Laura Ingraham Show* is syndicated by Talk Radio Network, and its host was described by *Talkers Magazine* as the “leading nationally-syndicated female political talker [with a] razor wit.”<sup>13</sup>

Scholars have recognized that political talk radio is more effective than many other forms of mass media at generating a sense of solidarity and

community among its audience members. Many believe the format provides “a venue for a public that feels ignored, isolated, alienated, and powerless to channel their anger concerning...actions by political elites...”<sup>14</sup> Politics/issues talk stations can also take the lead in affecting political attitudes and social change. Some believe that the impeachment hearings of President Clinton would never have come about had it not been for hosts of political talk radio keeping listeners focused on the Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal. Others believe the historic recall election of California governor Gray Davis would not have occurred had it not been for the efforts of such political talk stations such as KSFO (San Francisco), KTZK (Sacramento) and KFI (Los Angeles). These stations not only consistently raised the topic of public dissatisfaction with Davis, but also actively collected listener signatures on petitions that led to the eventual recall.

### Sports Talk

Sports talk radio is a rising star in information radio. Growing from only a handful of stations dedicated

to sports programming, there are now more than one thousand commercial sports talk stations on the air, with some major markets supporting at least two sports talk stations. The vast majority of these stations are AM, but a few FM sports talk stations exist as well. Some of the leading stations in this genre include WFAN-AM (New York), WSCR-AM (Chicago) and WIP-AM (Philadelphia).

The growth of sports talk has been fueled not only by the overall success of information radio but also by the sports format's appeal to men in the 25 to 54 and 18 to 34 age groups, two elusive demographic groups much sought by advertisers. Another huge factor in sports talk's success was the development of a syndicated radio network as a brand extension of the cable television network ESPN. ESPN Radio is carried on hundreds of affiliates in the United States, with many of them airing the feed around the clock. Beyond getting the allure of the ESPN brand, affiliate programmers acquire some of the hot personalities that viewers are familiar with, such as Mike and Mike (Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic), Doug Gottlieb, and Brian Kenny. ESPN Radio is not the only full-time syndicated sports talk source: Sporting News Radio and Fox Sports Radio also reach millions of listeners each on hundreds of affiliates in North America.

Often, programmers who affiliate with these networks choose not to schedule all of the available programming, electing instead to schedule local hosts to discuss professional, minor league, collegiate and even high school sports of interest to the local market. Of course, play-by-play coverage of pro and college games is an important element, but other popular sports talk staples include scoreboard shows, interview shows and talk programs with a sports slant. Ultimately, decisions in this format, just like any other, must be made according to the desired target market of the programmer. For example, some ESPN Radio affiliates felt that the network's *The Tony Kornheiser Show* skewed too old for their programming strategies and opted instead to go after *The Jim Rome Show*, a stand-alone talk show syndicated by Premiere Radio Networks. Rome's in-your-face style as he "gives his take to the clones" (translation for those unfamiliar with

the show: "states his opinion to his listeners") is viewed as more attractive to the 18 to 34 male demographic. Similarly, *The Herd with Colin Cowherd* was picked up because it is a faster-paced show skewing to younger males.

Sports programmers agree that a successful sports talk station is more than just discussion of sports. In fact, some consultants prefer to call the format "guy talk" because what makes the format work is a combination of the games themselves and a celebration of the lifestyle that goes with them. The fun surrounding a football game is far more than just going to the game. The game becomes an excuse for a day-long or weekend-long party with tailgating, road trips and barbecuing. In sports radio, capturing on the air the lifestyle of the sports fans is what really makes this format work. Sports talk personalities commonly discuss movies, celebrities, politics, music and much more—as well as sports. In fact, ESPN Radio's morning drivetime show—*Mike & Mike in the Morning*—even has a daily stock report because the programmers at the network recognize that many of the males in their target market are interested not only in sports but also in business and investing.

## Success Talk

This format, also known as money talk or business radio, offers listeners a mix of investment and personal advice for financial success. Segments include discussion of stock trading, retirement planning, insurance issues and taxes. Some programmers of success talk also include programs that focus on health and recreation, chic travel and vacations, and upscale entertainment. Just like the sports talk format, some stations choose to sign on to a 24-hour syndicated network such as Bloomberg Radio. Others, however, use a mixture of nationally syndicated personalities (Clark Howard and Dave Ramsey) and locally known financial gurus. Although stations in this format rarely deliver large ratings, those that succeed do so because they convince advertisers that the listeners are very loyal and upwardly mobile. One of the best known of these shows appears only on the weekends: *Bob Brinker's*

*Moneytalk*, which focuses on financial advice. Examples of stations that program the success format include WBIX-AM (Boston) and KBNP-AM (Portland, Oregon).

## Hot Talk

This format focuses on discussions of sexual issues that are presented in a titillating way to appeal to the male audience. Hot Talk programmers are trying to develop a sound that expresses a “rock and roll” attitude without the music. However, the format has mostly retreated to satellite radio and digital platforms after the government’s crackdown on indecent content on broadcast stations.

It will come as no surprise that Howard Stern is one of the most successful hosts of talk radio with a “rock and roll” attitude. His move to satellite radio in 2006 left opportunities for others to grow even larger in their broadcast popularity, although the window of opportunity seems to be closing. *The Adam Carolla Show With Teresa Strasser* replaced Stern on KLSX (Los Angeles) when he moved to satellite. However, Carolla lost his job in 2009 when CBS radio converted the station from Hot Talk to a Top 40 music format. Carolla is now showing

success as a podcaster ([www.adamcarolla.com](http://www.adamcarolla.com)). Tom Leykis, a legendary name in the hot talk format, was also a casualty at KLSX. Steve Dahl, who was a hot talker at WCKG-FM (Chicago), also now hosts a podcast ([www.dahlcast.org](http://www.dahlcast.org)).

## Urban Talk

Stations programming this format tend to be in metro areas where the available listening audience includes a large number of middle to upper-middle-class African-Americans. The approach usually follows that of heritage or political talk, but the issues are those with a strong appeal to black listeners. A syndicated leader is *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, which is delivered by Joyner’s Reach Media to over 8 million listeners on more than 100 stations (see 12.10). Although music takes up a substantial portion of Joyner’s show, the key programming element is the information he and his co-hosts provide to their audience. Local stations programmed to focus on the urban issues of their communities are also highly popular in major urban areas. In addition to WVON-AM (Chicago), others in this format include WOL-AM (Washington, DC) and satellite radio’s “The Power.”

### 12.10 African-American Talk on Radio

*The Tom Joyner Morning Show* has made a big place for itself in the radio syndication history books. Begun in 1994, the show is one of the first nationally syndicated radio programs hosted and produced by an African-American and distributed by a nonblack network. It reaches about 8 million listeners on some 115 stations. Moreover, in 2003, Joyner (majority shareholder and chairman of Reach Media) assumed control and syndication of his own show, making this a rarity in syndication—a black-owned program.

Distributed as a four-hour morning-drive radio program, *The Tom Joyner Morning Show* appeals to an urban contemporary audience of affluent adults. It schedules a mix of oldies urban music, guests from politics and entertainment,

and multiple local tags or promos to give the show a “hometown feel.”

Tom Joyner, the self-proclaimed “hardest working man in radio,” made his name a household word with African-Americans while raising money for black colleges and other political causes. A daily segment called “It’s Your World” is one of the few present-day radio soap operas. Listeners say following the on-again, off-again relationships of various characters keeps them on the edge of their seats, and the rating books show that the segment certainly keeps them tuned in.

George L. Daniels, Ph.D.  
University of Alabama

## Faith Talk

This format has long consisted primarily of talk programming that focuses on Christian topics. Stations typically have a combination of syndicated program elements from such nationally known clergy as Max Lucado, T. D. Jakes and Joyce Meyer; they are accompanied by national and local political talk hosts offering their positions on topics from a Christian worldview. The faith talk format is expanding, however, with many more beliefs now represented. Some broadcast stations program exclusively Jewish talk and Catholic talk, supported by national Jewish and Catholic network programming. *Jewish Moments in the Morning* has been on New York/New Jersey's community radio WFMU since 1977 ([www.jmintheam.org](http://www.jmintheam.org)), and online sources include [www.jewishradio.com](http://www.jewishradio.com). Those of the Muslim faith can also find a talk-radio outlet on the web at [www.radioislam.com](http://www.radioislam.com), and Bahais can listen to [www.bahairadio.org](http://www.bahairadio.org). Moreover, podcasting provides for listeners a wealth of information across a wide range of religious and spiritual topics.

## Spanish/Foreign-Language Talk

This format, similar to the urban talk format, is one where the information being provided focuses on the needs of those whose native language is not English. Although the largest markets may have low-powered AM stations programming information in almost any native tongue, by far the dominant and fastest-growing foreign-language talk format is Spanish. The popularity of this format has grown rapidly along with the number of Spanish-speaking people in the United States and has been recognized by national networks.

Univision Radio owns or operates 70 radio stations in top markets across the country. Its strategy is to acquire English-language stations in markets with the largest Hispanic populations and relaunch them with Spanish language formats. Univision also syndicates its popular KSCA-FM (Los Angeles) program *Piolin por la Manana* (*Piolin in the Morning*) hosted by Eddie "Piolin" Sotelo.

ESPN recognized the importance of this growing demographic when it launched ESPN Deportes

Radio, an around-the-clock national Spanish-language sports radio network that serves Hispanic sports fans in the United States. The network has 44 affiliates throughout the country, reaching nearly 60 percent of the Hispanic population in the U.S. The network is also available via SiriusXM Satellite Radio. Of course, regardless of the language, many information stations now stream their signals over the web, giving non-English speakers easy access to foreign-language talk stations from around the globe with the click of a mouse.

## Health and Help Talk

Although it is rare to find a station that programs this format exclusively, many programmers find that a regular offering of some type of advice to listeners is a good addition to their broadcast schedule. The type of advice varies widely and is usually limited only by the host's expertise. Advice programming contains information on nutrition, health, relationships, home improvement, sexuality, the law—the list is almost endless. Some syndicated weekday leaders in this area include *Duke and the Doctor* (for health-related concerns) and Dr. Joy Browne (for relationship issues). Also in this category falls the network devoted to serving the nation's truckers who are often on the road during the overnight hours. The Midnight Trucking Radio Network reaches all of the United States and over 75 percent of Canada and Mexico, thanks to overnight broadcasts on many 50,000-watt stations in the United States (see 12.11).

Often, shows falling in the health/help talk category air only once a week—usually on the weekend. Well-known nationally syndicated examples include *At Home With Gary Sullivan*, a show about home improvement, and *On the Garden Line*. Many such weekend shows also produce "daily minutes" offering tidbits of advice to listeners while also promoting their long-form weekend programming.

## Technology Talk

Originally referred to as "internet talk," this format has now expanded to include discussions of anything to do with computers and technology. Although it is

## 12.11 Midnight Trucking Radio Network

Calling itself the “national clearinghouse of information, thoughts, and opinions of the American Truck Driver,” the Midnight Trucking Radio Network (MTRN) airs nightly from midnight until 5 A.M. on 60 affiliates. The number of MTRN affiliates may seem miniscule compared to the hundreds of stations carrying *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. However, the network can actually be heard in almost every market of the country because ten of its affiliates broadcast on 50,000-watt clear channel transmitters that have tremendous geographic reach during the overnight hours. This national reach is also expanded by MTRN’s availability on mobile devices and the web.

MTRN hosts Eric Harley and Gary McNamara take calls from truckers and deliver information precisely targeted toward their specific audience, including hourly reports of weather along the nation’s highways, announcements of road closings and construction delays, news about legislation affecting the trucking industry, and daily maintenance tips. They also take calls from truckers behind the wheel during segments focusing on everything from semi-truck insurance issues to the latest in truck technologies. So, as the network’s website ([www.midnight-trucking.com](http://www.midnight-trucking.com)) says, “Whether you’re behind the wheel or just can’t sleep, you’re never alone ... when you’ve got The Midnight Trucking Radio Network.”

unlikely that a programmer will choose to focus on this topic 24 hours a day, weekly programs focusing on computers have been highly successful. *The Kim Komando Show* is a weekly syndicated show remarkable not only for explaining technical issues about computers in very simple terms to callers but also for being hosted by a very knowledgeable female personality in a stereotypically male-dominated genre.

## The Content Infrastructure

Most information radio formats are constructed to showcase different types of content during different dayparts. Heritage talk stations, for example, schedule a heavy load of news during morning drivetime (from 5 to 9 A.M. or 6 to 10 A.M.) and again during afternoon drivetime (from about 4 to 6 P.M. depending on the market). The rest of their program days are devoted to various kinds of talk programs and often include some type of sports programming.

Although news and talk stations are often seen as similar because their spoken-word formats are so distinct from music stations, they are in fact very different from one another. The all-news programmer oversees the equivalent of a single program that recycles for 24 hours throughout each day, whereas talk programmers fill most of their days with diverse shows lasting from one to six hours. The talk

programmer must also consider the gratifications desired by various kinds of talk listeners. Some are attracted by the personality of such hosts as Schlesinger or Limbaugh. Others use talk radio primarily as a way to gather information. While some listen to hear viewpoints that differ from their own, many appreciate hearing their own opinions validated by the program host.

The programming infrastructures for both news and talk formats, however, are usually created on computers and form the skeletons on which hang the sections of hard news, features, talk programs, game coverage, sports commentaries, editorials and so on. At all-news stations, newscasts are repeated in 20-, 30-, 45- or 60-minute sequences, although most stations prefer the shorter 20-minute cycles. Cycle length affects spot and headline placement; time, traffic, weather and sports scheduling; major news story development; and feature scheduling. Advantages and disadvantages are inherent in all lengths; which cycle pattern a programmer chooses depends on local market conditions, staff capability, editorial supervision, program content and commercial load.

As mentioned earlier, *information formats usually program a larger commercial load than music stations because the spots seem less intrusive*. Typically, each hour on an information station contains 12 to 18 minutes of spot announcements. Talk stations tend to have fewer breaks per hour, and often

the number and location are dictated by the programs' syndicators. All-news stations, especially those with frequent news and traffic updates, may run as few as one or two spots in breaks coming every five minutes or less.

## Hosts

In the all-news format, many of the on-air talent are **experienced journalists**. Some have spent years in television or print news prior to joining a radio staff. Sometimes, radio hosts have many information careers going at once. Mitch Albom hosts a syndicated talk show and writes for the *Detroit Free Press*. Brian Kilmeade hosts a three-hour talk show on Fox News Radio just after completing duties as a co-host of *Fox and Friends* on the Fox News cable network. Talk hosts are sometimes experts in their particular field (for example, the doctors or scientists in the health/help talk format), but usually could best be described as generalists. They have developed the ability to grasp a subject's essence. The host of a general-interest issues talk program will discuss world and local affairs, politics, medicine, economics, science, history, literature, music, art, sports and entertainment trivia—often on a single show. It thus becomes a vital part of the host's daily preparation to keep abreast of current events and to have at least some familiarity with a wide range of topics. Hosts can subscribe to “show prep” services to receive background information and summaries of news events and political happenings.

## Callers and Listeners

It is important for an information programmer (*any* radio programmer, really) to remember that people who are motivated enough to call the station and try to get on the air represent only a small fraction of the audience. According to surveys by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, only 11 percent of Americans say they have attempted to call a talk-radio program; of these, only 6 percent report that they made it on the air. It is common for show producers and screeners to choose callers to put on the air according to their likelihood of offering an interesting perspective on the topic being discussed or saying

something that may hit a nerve with the host or other listeners. Programmers should keep in mind that, although the audience may like *listening* to this controversy, most people will not hold such extreme viewpoints. Callers do not provide an accurate profile of listeners, but station personnel frequently become so focused on calls that they forget about the larger audience—which should be their prime concern. Switching the emphasis to the listening audience usually makes ratings go up. What is known about the talk-radio *listener* appears in 12.12.

## Commercial Interests

Of all radio formats, talk is the most vulnerable to the appearance of what is really unscheduled commercial matter. *Payola* and *plugola* have long been associated with the music industry, but the talk format offers greater opportunities for such abuses. An hour of friendly conversation presents frequent chances for the on-air host to mention a favorite resort or restaurant or to comment on a newly acquired automobile. Moreover, the program host is often in the position of booking favored business acquaintances as guests. The on-air personality receives many offers from potential guests and local businesses, ranging from free dinners to discounts on major purchases. Policies aimed at preventing regulatory violations must emphasize that

### 12.12 Demographic Profile of News/Talk/Information Radio Listeners

1. Almost 60 percent of the audience is male.
2. More than three-fourths are age 45 or older.
3. Three-fourths have attended college, with 44 percent holding college degrees.
4. Almost two-thirds live in households earning more than \$50,000.
5. More than two-thirds own their homes.

*Radio Today 2010: How America Listens to Radio*, Arbitron Marketing Communications, 2010, retrieved from <http://www.arbitron.com/home/radiotoday.htm>.

management will severely penalize culprits. Stations often require their on-air talent and producers to sign affidavits showing that they understand the law on these points, and some hire independent agencies to monitor their talk programs for abuses. More than one station has reinforced this message by billing on-air performers for the time when their casual conversations became “commercials.”

However, guests representing commercial enterprises may certainly appear on the station. It is appropriate, for instance, for a local travel agent to discuss travel in mainland China or for the proprietor of a health food store to present opinions on nutrition. And, obviously, many personalities on the talk-show circuit have something to sell—a book, a movie, a sporting event, a philosophy and so on. Some mention of the individual’s reason for appearing is appropriate because it establishes the guest’s credentials. An apt reference might be, “Our subject today is the popularity of computer games, and our guest is Dr. Ted Castronova, author of a new book entitled *Synthetic Worlds*.” A gray area arises on those occasions when the host seems to be strongly encouraging listeners to buy the book. If the host has no financial interest in the publication, however, a claim of violating FCC regulations is unlikely.

## On-Air Talk Techniques

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Call-in programs are the backbone of talk radio. They can also be complicated to produce, especially if a program has a dozen phone lines to deal with. To help the on-air personality run a smooth show, the *call screener* or producer has become a vital part of the talk-radio staff. The screener is partly a “warm-up artist” for the host—building up the caller’s enthusiasm and excitement so that it comes through in the caller’s interaction with the host—and partly serves as a traffic cop.

### Telephone Screeners

Screeners add substantially to station budgets, but a station can control its programming only through careful screening. Many hosts and programmers

view airing “cold” or unscreened calls as a dangerous practice. Jim Bohannon of Westwood One, on the other hand, prefers the spontaneity of unscreened calls, saying to his listeners, “If you get in, you get on.”

The screener for a talk program functions as a gatekeeper, exercising significant control over the information that reaches the air. Screeners constantly manipulate the lineup of incoming calls, giving priority to more appropriate callers and delaying or eliminating callers of presumably lesser interest. The screener asks each caller a series of questions to determine whether the call will be used: “What topic do you want to talk about? How do you feel about it? Why do you want to speak on the air?” At the same time, the screener determines whether callers are articulate, whether their comments are likely to promote the flow of the program, and whether they possess some unique quality that the host and audience will find appealing (see 12.13). In the case of *The Dr. Laura Show*, for example, the screener prompts callers to begin by thanking the host and tries to get each one focused on a specific question to ask.

The screener also asks for the caller’s name. Most stations prohibit the use of full names to forestall imposters from identifying themselves as prominent people in a community and then airing false statements to embarrass the individuals they claim to be. Another job for the screener is to filter out the “regulars” who call the station too frequently as well as those unable or unlikely to make a coherent contribution. When screeners must dump a caller, they say something like, “Thank you for calling, but I don’t think we’ll be able to get you on the air today.” Callers thus dismissed and those asked to hold for long periods often complain of unfair treatment, but the screener must prevail, insisting on the right to structure the best possible conversational sequence. The most effective screeners perform their jobs with tact and graciousness, but a few callers always go away mad.

When a program depends on callers, what happens in those nightmare moments when there are none? For just this emergency, most talk-show hosts maintain a clipping file containing newspaper



## 12.13 Host Displays

Various systems are used for the screener to signal to the on-air host which incoming call is to be aired next. Most talk stations now utilize computer software they have developed themselves or a commercial product. Using computers shifts greater program control to the on-air host. The computer display indicates the number and nature of the calls prepared for airing as well as the first name, gender and approximate age of each caller, and it may specify the point the caller wishes to discuss. The host can then alter the complexion of the program by orchestrating call order.

The display also frequently includes material of practical conversational value, such as the current weather forecast and news headlines. Hosts often use a timer to monitor call length, and many hosts cut a caller off, as politely as possible, after 90 seconds to two minutes to keep the pace of the program moving. *Listeners will tune out a poor phone call on a talk station just as they would a weak song on a*

*music station.* Thus, hosts must control the on-air subject matter and the flow of program material rather than let callers dictate the programming. The point is to move the show along rather than get bogged down making sure each caller gets his or her “full” say.

Almost all talk stations use an electronic unit that delays the programming about seven seconds to allow the host or audio board operator to censor profanity, personal attacks and other questionable utterances. The on-air host generally controls a “cut button” that diverts offensive program material, although the engineer should have a backup switch. Because the program is delayed, the screener instructs all callers to turn off their radios before talking on the air. If they fail to do this, callers hear their voices coming back at them on a delayed basis and cannot carry on a conversation, causing the host to exclaim, “Turn your radio down!” Listening only on the telephone, callers hear the real-time program material and can talk normally with the host.

and magazine articles saved from their general reading to provide a background for monologues when no calls come in. Another strategy is the expert phone list, a list of 10 or 20 professionals with expertise in subjects of broad appeal. Resorting to the list should yield at least one or two able to speak by phone when the host needs to fill time in order to sustain a program.

### Controversy, Balance, and Pressure

Although information radio programmers get many opportunities for creative expression, they also must devote considerable time to administration. Because the station deals almost constantly with public-affairs issues, its programmers spot-monitor the station's programs for compliance with FCC rules, and to avoid legal problems such as slander. A programmer, however, having many other duties as well, rarely knows as much about the minute-by-minute program as heavy listeners do. Therefore, digital backup systems must be established. Many stations

keep archived recordings of previous broadcasts in order to respond to complaints made by the public.

Talk stations frequently find themselves the targets of pressure groups, activist organizations and political parties trying to gain free access to the station's airtime. Although most partisans deserve some airtime in the interest of fairness and balance, management must turn away those seeking inordinate amounts of airtime. Because of this, and the fact that an effective talk station frequently deals with controversial issues, management can expect threats of all kinds from irate audience members. A provoked listener will demand anything from a retraction to equal time, and on occasion, someone will threaten legal action.

Potential lawsuits usually vanish, however, when management explains the relevant broadcast law to the complainant. Review of the archived program proves very handy in these situations. When the station is even slightly in the wrong, it is good policy to provide rebuttal time for an overlooked point of view.

A primary ingredient in the recipe for success in any talk format is commitment at the top—at the station management level. A timely and innovative music format can catapult a station from obscurity to the number-one ranking during a single rating period. Talk stations and all-news stations, on the other hand, generally take years to reach their potential. Once success is achieved, however, the talk station enjoys a listener loyalty that endures long after the more fickle music audience shifts from station to station in search of the hits. *High figures for time-spent-listening and long-term stability in cumulative ratings demonstrate audience loyalty in the information format.*

## Information Formats on Public Radio

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Until now this chapter has focused on programming *commercial* information stations—a task that is ultimately guided by the specific goal of gathering either a large audience or one with an extremely desirable demographic and psychographic profile that can then be sold to advertisers. The discussion now turns toward another type of information radio, the public stations, usually guided more by delivering what the programmers believe is important information than by the struggle to gain high ratings.

Information programming is among the most popular formats on public radio stations—at least during large blocks of the day. Talk shows such as *Car Talk* and *A Prairie Home Companion* attract large, loyal audiences (see 12.14). Similarly, news programs such as *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* are popular and trusted sources for millions of Americans. Because of their popularity, the potential for earning commercial revenue from these shows is great. However, public stations are prohibited from airing advertisements and explicitly committed to serving as an alternative to commercial broadcasting by providing programs for specialized, small-audience needs. Instead of selling commercial spots, the major public radio networks sell their programs to affiliates (the member stations), who must in turn find funds from local

underwriting by businesses and from listener donations during periodic pledge drives. The three major networks, National Public Radio (NPR), Public Radio International (PRI) and American Public Media (APM), also look for underwriting from national companies and foundations in order to fund their production operations and keep the program acquisition fees charged to affiliates as low as possible.

Sometimes, donations to the national public networks can create a catch-22 situation. This was experienced in a grand way in 2003. In January of that year, NPR received a \$14 million grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. At the time it was the largest grant the public radio network had ever received. Only a few months later, it was announced that Joan B. Kroc—late millionaire widow of the founder of the McDonald's restaurant chain—had bequeathed more than \$200 million to NPR; it was one of the largest individual gifts to any cultural organization in history and far overshadowed the extraordinary MacArthur gift. Referring to Kroc's gift, NPR's President Kevin Klose said, "This remarkable act of generosity will help secure the future of NPR as a trusted and independent source of news," but he also worried that news of the gift would keep listeners of local stations from making individual contributions, something that would severely hurt the local affiliates because none of the gift would go directly to the local level.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike affiliates of traditional commercial networks, public radio stations are free to choose programs from any source, including from the three major national competitors, PRI, NPR and APM. Individual public radio programmers often decide that their local audiences are best served by airing NPR's *Morning Edition* followed immediately by APM's business news program *Marketplace Morning Report*. More important than allegiance to one network are a station's philosophy toward its audience and its fundraising capability, degree of localism, and integrity.

As in public television, the nature of the licensee determines many of the station's goals. About 60 percent of public radio stations have colleges and universities as their licensees, while about one-third are licensed to independent community organizations, 6 percent to local school districts or local

## 12.14 A Companion to Prairie Home Companion

"It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my home town." For almost 30 years, those words have introduced listeners to the lives of the most famous nonexistent residents of Minnesota's most famous nonexistent town. Those are also the words associated with Garrison Keillor, one of the world's greatest living storytellers. But few could have seen his genius in the beginning.

The name *A Prairie Home Companion* was borrowed from the Prairie Home Cemetery in Moorhead, Minnesota, back in 1969 when Keillor was doing a morning show on Minnesota Public Radio. While researching the Grand Ole Opry for an article, Keillor had one of those incredibly brilliant moments that most others would have considered insane. His idea was to produce an old-fashioned radio variety show. Never mind that live radio plays had been declared dead for more than 20 years. NPR wasn't interested, but about five years later, with the help of the more adventurous Minnesota Public Radio, Garrison Keillor's first variety broadcast occurred on the campus of Macalester College in St. Paul. There were 12 people in the audience. As they say, the rest is history.

News of the seemingly innovative program quickly spread by word of mouth, audiences grew, and a decade later the show moved into a larger St. Paul theater (later renamed the Fitzgerald Theater) where it has been—with brief interruptions—ever since. Those interruptions included renovations in 1986, Keillor's retirement from radio in 1987 to marry and move to Europe, and the period from 1989 to 1993 when the show was broadcast from New York under the name *Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company*.

Today, alongside Garrison Keillor, a small group of people keep the show going. These include Pat Donohue,

Andy Stein, Richard Dworsky, Arnie Kinsella and Gary Raynor (making up Guy's All-Star Shoe Band), and Tom Keith and Fred Newman handling sound effects. Tim Russell, Sue Scott and Erica Rhodes contribute as actors. These people, along with a seemingly endless list of guest stars (the show is considered one of the most significant outlets for all genres of folk music) keep the only regularly scheduled live radio variety show in the United States fresh and innovative every week.

People everywhere now know about "The Catchup Advisory Board" (a compromise between the two spellings of catsup and ketchup) and "natural mellowing agents," The Professional Organization of English Majors, Be-Bop-A-Re-Bop Rhubarb Pie, the Café Boeuf, and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery (where "if you can't find it, you can probably get along without it"). Guy Noir and Dusty and Lefty have become household names; Dusty and Lefty even have their own sponsor (Prairie Dog Granola Bars—"healthier than chewing tobacco and you don't have to spit"). Perhaps the reason the program seems to speak to so many people, and has lasted so long, are its regular looks into the ordinary lives of the citizens of the fictional Lake Wobegon.

Carried by about 500 radio stations and listened to by nearly 4 million people in the United States, *A Prairie Home Companion* has become a worldwide broadcasting phenomenon, aired in different versions by New Zealand's National Radio, WRN in Europe, BBC 7 in England and RTE in Ireland, among other places. It has also become the flagship program for its distributor, American Public Media, which challenges NPR for the public broadcasting crown.

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governments, and 4 percent to state governments. Because most public stations rely on NPR, PRI and APM for much of their information programming, a brief look at each appears in 12.15, 12.16 and 12.17. Pacifica, one of the most influential of public station groups, is described in 12.18.

A myriad of other sources for programming—informational and otherwise—are available to

noncommercial radio programmers. WFMT's Beethoven Satellite Network, the Association of Independents in Radio (AIR) and a variety of station programming consortia that have emerged to provide program elements. The appetite is strong for more information programming than NPR, PRI, APM or any commercial outlet, for that matter, can supply.

## 12.15 National Public Radio

A private, nonprofit corporation, NPR contributes programming to more than 900 nonprofit radio stations that broadcast to communities in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia and even the Virgin Islands. It programs two channels on SiriusXM Satellite Radio, produces multiple international services heard in more than 150 countries, provides programming for Armed Services Radio and operates NPR FM 104.1 in Berlin, Germany.

The considerable international reach of NPR's information programming through satellite delivery is now extended through digital media platforms. NPR.org presents constantly updated news, streaming audio, downloadable multimedia content (including video and photojournalism) and podcasts. NPR has launched several apps for smartphones and tablet computers.

In the United States, each NPR station is itself a production center, capable of producing and distributing programming to the entire system. Each station mixes locally produced programs with those transmitted from the national production center. A combined satellite and internet content distribution service allows better-quality transmission of existing programs. The high quality of national programs frequently entices stations to use NPR's offerings.

NPR schedules news, public affairs, arts, music and drama programs to fit into whatever formats member stations choose. The news programs *Morning Edition*, *All*

*Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition* are its most distinguished trademarks and the core of its program service. NPR also successfully programs talk about politics and social issues with shows such as *Talk of the Nation* and *Fresh Air*. NPR also has provided leadership in music and arts programming for the public radio system with such shows as *From the Top*, *JazzSet*, *Radiolab* and live broadcasts of musical events from Europe and around the United States. It has provided stations with in-depth reporting on education, bilingual Spanish news features, and live coverage of Senate and House committee hearings.

However, not everyone applauds NPR programs. Conservative members of Congress complain that NPR's programs have a liberal bias (denied by NPR) and have proposed prohibiting any federal funds from being used to pay for NPR programs. While NPR does not receive funding directly from Congress for its operations, its member stations rely on grants from the taxpayer-funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to help pay NPR programming fees. Threats to NPR funding rise and fall depending upon which political party controls Congress. Efforts to cut-off funds and growing pressure to reduce government spending mean NPR and public radio stations across the country need to rally listeners periodically to contact Congress in support of public broadcasting.

## 12.16 Public Radio International

In 1983 a group of five stations formed a second public national radio network called American Public Radio (APR). Minnesota Public Radio, KUSC-FM in Los Angeles, KQED-FM in San Francisco, WNYC AM/FM in New York and WGUC in Cincinnati initially joined together to market and distribute programs they produced and to acquire other programming to distribute to affiliates. The name was changed to Public Radio International (PRI) in 1994 to help end confusion between APR and NPR and also to underline the network's interest in importing and exporting radio programs in the international marketplace.

Today, PRI programming is carried by over 880 affiliated stations. Its content is also available on pri.org through a smartphone app and podcasts. Its stated mission is "to serve audiences as a distinctive content source for information, insights and cultural experiences essential to living in our diverse, interconnected world."<sup>16</sup> Although well-known for its music programs, it is telling that the first goal PRI claims is to provide information. PRI distributes news programs such as *BBC World Service*, *The World* and *America Abroad*. It also has the urban-talk program *The Tavis Smiley Show*, the popular storytelling program *This American Life* and health information shows such as *Zorba Paster on Your Health*.

## 12.17 American Public Media

American Public Media (APM), the parent organization for Minnesota Public Radio, Southern California Public Radio and Classical South Florida, is the largest owner and operator of public radio stations and produces more than 20 public radio programs that are heard on nearly 800 stations. APM is the largest producer and distributor of classical music programming in the United States. It is home to the immensely popular variety show *A Prairie Home Companion*, as well as the weekday business show *Marketplace*. Other talk/information programs produced and distributed by APM include *American RadioWorks*, *The Story* and *Being* (featuring “conversations about life’s deepest questions”).

That was certainly part of the logic behind the 1999 FCC rules that introduced noncommercial low-power FM (LPFM) radio service. LPFM consists of stations with either maximum power levels of just 10 watts (reaching areas with a radius of 1 to 2 miles) or 100 watts (reaching areas with a radius of approximately 3.5 miles). Despite vigorous lobbying against the idea by National Association of Broadcasters (NAB)—who were concerned that the presence of even low-power transmission towers would interfere with existing commercial broadcast station signals—today hundreds of LPFM stations broadcast information programming to local communities. Most are programmed by educational facilities, local church groups or city governments.

## 12.18 The Pacifica Group

The Pacifica stations—WBAI-FM (New York), WPFV-FM (Washington, DC), KPFT-FM (Houston), KPFA-FM (Berkeley) and KPFK-FM (Los Angeles)—pioneered the news and public-affairs format for noncommercial public radio. The Pacifica Foundation, licensee of the stations in this group, has a specific social and political purpose that influences its approach to news and public affairs. Listeners have little difficulty recognizing the far left-wing political predisposition, and Pacifica is open about its philosophy. Its network’s mission is “to promote peace and justice

Finally, the government is, itself, in the noncommercial information radio business. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) broadcasts local weather information over 1,000 NOAA stations in the 160-megahertz band, and state governments operate numerous Highway Advisory Radio (HAR) stations within the AM broadcast band (see 12.19 and 12.20).

## What Lies Ahead

When it comes to the future of information radio, perhaps the most obvious statement is that the format is not going to disappear any time soon. Our society has developed a high level of urgency about obtaining relevant news and information. However, programmers might wonder whether traditional terrestrial radio is going to disappear now that content can be delivered on multiple digital platforms.

In simpler times, programmers only worried about competition from the radio stations in their markets and had the straightforward task of attracting listeners to their stations’ frequencies and keeping them listening for as long as possible. Now that cell phones and computers have evolved into wireless multimedia devices, consumers can access audio, video, text and more from around the world in the palm of their hands and listen, watch or read on their own terms. *Programmers must now export content to listeners rather than just importing listeners to the content on radio stations.*

through communication between all races, nationalities and cultures.”<sup>17</sup>

These stations were especially successful during the late 1960s and early 1970s when the nation was highly politicized over Vietnam and Watergate. In their reporting of that war and the surrounding issues they demonstrated the vital role played by broadcasting that is free from commercial restraints. Pacifica stations played a similar role during the brief Persian Gulf War and continued with vocal criticism of the United States’ invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

## 12.19 NOAA Weather Radio

**N**OAA Weather Radio is a nationwide network of radio stations broadcasting continuous weather information direct from a nearby National Weather Service office. NOAA Weather Radio broadcasts National Weather Service warnings, watches, forecasts and other hazard information 24 hours a day. Under the FCC's new Emergency Alert System, NOAA Weather Radio has become an "all hazards" radio network, making it the single source for the most comprehensive weather and emergency information available to the public. NOAA Weather Radio broadcasts warning and post-event information for both natural (such as earthquakes and volcano activity)

and technological (such as chemical releases or oil spills) hazards.

Known as the "Voice of the National Weather Service," NOAA Weather Radio is provided as a public service by the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The NOAA Weather Radio network has more than 1,000 transmitters that cover the 50 states, adjacent coastal waters, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the U.S. Pacific Territories. NOAA Weather Radio requires a special radio receiver or scanner capable of picking up the signal. Broadcasts are found in the public service band at these seven frequencies (MHz): 162.400, 162.425, 162.450, 162.475, 162.500, 162.525 and 162.550.

## 12.20 Highway Advisory Radio

**A**long highways people see bright orange signs with flashing lights along the side of the road. Such signs read, "Motorist Advisory When Flashing: Tune Radio to 1610 AM" (or some similar frequency). This is an invitation to listen to Highway Advisory Radio (HAR) stations. HAR stations give motorists a wide variety of information, such as details about the latest highway construction and maintenance projects, details on local traffic and weather conditions that may impede travel, locations of upcoming rest stops and descriptions of local points of interest.

These broadcasts are possible as the result of an FCC authorization for "Travelers' Information Stations." According to FCC regulations, radio frequencies 530 through 1700 kHz may be used by governmental entities and parks districts to inform the public about traveler safety information. There are some limitations, however, such as the output power of HAR stations cannot exceed 10 watts, and transmissions may not interfere with any existing commercial stations (which is why HAR stations are usually at the very far ends of the AM band). In addition, identifying the commercial names of businesses is prohibited.

Broadcasters will hang onto the traditional radio advertising business model as long as possible while they struggle with learning how to best make money from digital platforms like podcasting, web streaming and smartphone apps. Some form of multiplatform strategy has become crucial, but at present, user payments for apps get divided among several parties, leaving only a trickle for stations. However, advertisers are likely to be less than pleased if listeners prefer commercial-free digital downloads over listening in real time to the advertiser-supported version on the radio. Broadcast programmers need to work closely with sales managers and general managers to develop business models that maximize both audiences and revenue.

Programmers will also be wondering where they will find the talent necessary to attract a loyal audience and build a brand that can be marketed on multiple platforms. No matter how content is delivered, it will always be essential to have compelling personalities who can attract listeners. And those new talk-radio personalities will likely be found with loyal followings on digital platforms rather than working their way up from small market broadcast stations. Some may see a brighter future building their own empires on digital platforms rather than sharing profits with station owners and syndicators.

Finally, talk radio programmers will continue seeking ways to attract younger audiences that

advertisers say they prefer. As the baby boom ages and AM radio station audiences get older, look for more talk radio formats to migrate to the FM band. With more people preferring to listen to music on MP3 players and through web streaming services, FM broadcast stations will have to reinvent themselves just as AM radio did when music formats migrated to FM.

It would be easy to count radio out, but it has faced challenges before and adjusted to continue being a viable medium. "I believe there is a future for traditional radio, but we also have to remember we're in the communications business, not the radio business," says Jerry Bader, the news/talk program director for Midwest Communications. "The challenge for radio is to use print and video formats to grow the on-air product to the new platforms, not just move them over."<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

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